

Sustainability Self-Assessment and Business Model Design

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The business case of sustainability has been argued for by many authors (e.g., Willard, 2002; Willard, 2007; McNall, et al. 2011). Still, the majority of sustainability-related actions are pushed by regulatory requirements. Only a small number of companies consider proactive actions substantially rewarding. Suggested remedy for this includes better access to frameworks for understanding sustainability, value creation and the business cases thereof (Berns, et al., 2009). Therefore, decision support for corporations to formulate goals and systematically organize strategic responses for fulfilling the goals is essential during early phases of the innovation process. (Roozenburg and Eekels, 1995).

The usual absence of an operational definition of sustainability is still a major barrier to corporate strategic sustainable development (Holmberg and Robèrt, 2000). An operational sustainability definition that can guide assessment of the current situation, stimulate generation of ideas for upstream solutions and prioritization of early smart actions, is among the most promising leverage points for understanding corporations self-interest in strategic sustainability work and therefore for sustainable development of society.

Various methods and tools are available to stimulate innovation and sustainable development; however, these are mainly focused on specific ecological, social and or economic aspects and are not serving organizations to integrate a strategic approach and systems perspective on sustainability. A methodology based on back casting from operational sustainability principles has been proposed with the objective to guide the integration of tools and approaches when used for planning for sustainability (Robèrt et al. 2002). The aim of the research presented in this paper is to use this framework as a basis for proposing a tool for self-assessment of an organization's current maturity and performance from a strategic sustainability point of view and to test this tool in a number of organizations. We are in particular interested in studying whether the outlined tool is perceived by the studied organizations to be: (i) easy to comprehend, (ii) relevant, (iii) capable of differentiating the organizations in a comprehensive way and (iv) helpful for discovering insufficiencies that the organizations were not already aware of.

A self-assessment matrix is outlined and tested. It displays a logical set of template-statements and, in relation to those, four maturity degrees (MD) at each level of the framework. The four MDs represent the organization maturity in addressing sustainability issues in a strategic way. A visual representation is also created to illustrate the organisations sustainability profile in a compact and easily accessible way. The matrix was applied in an action-research mode to assess the studied organizations. Results show that the matrix works to (i) sensitize organizations to an approach that is more strategic and less reductionist and (ii) support systematic cooperation for development of sustainability-driven goals, targets and indicators.

Projects, setting a light on the relations between the different system elements and stakeholders demands.